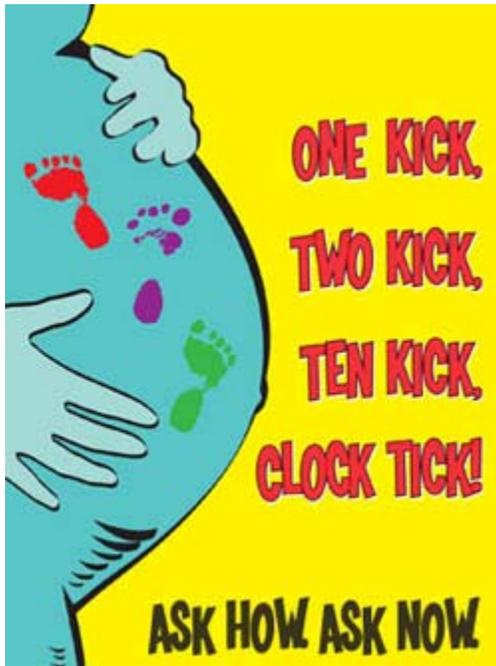


## Iowa sisterhood helps new moms get (and count) their kicks

By Lynda Waddington 7/2/09 11:37 AM

***“There is in every woman’s heart, a spark of heavenly fire, which lies dormant in the broad daylight of prosperity, but which kindles up and beams and blazes in the dark hour of adversity.” — Washington Irving, 1783-1859***



An Iowa sisterhood formed out of shared grief, has no interest in increasing its numbers. In fact, the five founding Iowa women are hard at work to decrease their prospective membership pool.

Tiffan Yamen, Kate Safris, Janet Petersen, Jan Caruthers and Kerry Biondi-Morlan discovered one another in 2003 after each had experienced the death of an infant daughter. Although the circumstances surrounding their daughter’s deaths are different, the immediate understanding they had for one another’s grief sparked a friendship. And, from that that friendship, sparked a mission.

The women, all from Des Moines, founded Healthy Birth Day, an organization devoted to preventing stillbirth and infant death through research, education and advocacy. Their latest project, Count the Kicks, launched officially in

June.

Petersen, a state representative who lost her daughter Grace in July 2003 to a true knot in the umbilical cord, first met Yeman, who had lost her daughter Madeline, also to a knotted cord, just seven weeks earlier. Through mutual friends the two women were introduced to Caruthers and Biondi-Morland, whose daughters Jayden and Grace, respectively, were also stillborn, and Safris, who lost daughter Emma to congenital heart defects shortly after her birth.

The Count the Kicks awareness campaign was developed by the five Iowa women pictured above who founded the Healthy Birth Day organization. Each of the women lost a daughter to either stillbirth or infant death and don't want other parents to experience the same.

“At that point we just looked at one another and said ‘enough.’ We knew we had to start doing something about this,” Petersen said. “There are a lot of things for



bereavement available, but what we wanted to do is make sure that no one had to go through the same things we had gone through.”

The Count the Kicks awareness campaign is the group’s first effort to reach out directly to pregnant women with a plan of action that can alert families to possible complications. Radio public service announcements featuring celebrities were followed by whimsical posters and brochures intended for doctor’s offices and clinics. All materials produced by the group outline the importance of counting fetal movements daily during late pregnancy.

“Counting fetal movements isn’t something we came up with it,” Biondi-Morland explained. “The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists have a brochure on it, and they are the ones who set the parameters. We just noticed patients weren’t actively seeking out that information and physicians weren’t actively promoting it. It is something that’s been known for a long time, we just want to promote it and place it at the front of pregnant mother’s minds.”

The women are promoting counting fetal kicks as a pro-active task women and their families can do, something that can help create an early bond with the baby.

“This is a positive message, not a scary message,” Petersen said. “I did have someone who worried that this message might scare women, but I don’t see that. Women are encouraged to do a monthly breast self-exam. That message is not intended to scare them, but intended to save their life. The same is true of this count the kicks message.”

It’s a message that Iowa First Lady Mari Culver is proud to help promote. She and University of Iowa football coach Kirk Ferentz recorded public service announcements that have ran statewide, encouraging pregnant women to keep track of fetal movements.

“Chet and I have been so fortunate,” Culver said. “We have had two healthy pregnancies that resulted in two healthy babies. We want all lowans to experience that. So, the when the women approached me about doing this, I could see that there was a real need to get this preventative message out. I was glad to do it.”

And, the Count the Kicks program already has someone who can speak directly to the benefits of counting kicks. Jennifer McCune, of South Sioux City, was 37 weeks into pregnancy with her son, Danny, when she noticed that he wasn’t moving as much as he had been. Three hours later, Danny was born via emergency c-section, the umbilical cord wrapped four times around his neck. She credits a magazine advertisement by First Candle for the knowledge to seek medical help and her son’s life, and has agreed to help Count the Kicks promote their message.

The initiative is first being piloted in Iowa and the Pittsburgh area, funded in part by a grant from the Heinz Family Philanthropies. Once the organization has developed a workable plan, the Iowa women hope to expand the awareness campaign nationally.

Safris admits that in the beginning, the task of launching this campaign seemed quite daunting. She also says that being a part of it, even the parts that were outside of her immediate comfort zone, has renewed her faith in what average citizens can accomplish when they set out to make a difference.

“I remember my husband and I sitting in the car just a few weeks after Emma had died, and I was just so angry,” she said. “My husband looked at me and told me that I could not go through life like that, being that angry. At that moment I realized that I couldn’t be that way, and that wasn’t who I was. The fact that I had a loss was not going to define me in a negative way. I had to make something good of it.

“At the time of that revelation, I had not yet met these women, so I didn’t know yet what that ‘good’ was going to be. Eight years ago [when we lost Emma], I had no idea that I would be here and doing this. I wouldn’t change the fact that I had her and she was a part of my life. She has made me a better person and that has had an impact on other people.”

The women are quick to point out that although stillbirth and infant death aren’t openly discussed, it’s likely that most people have in some way been impacted by them. Across the nation, about one out of every 150 pregnancies ends in stillbirth.

“We want to remember and honor our daughters — we are all inspired by them to be advocates,” Petersen said. “We want to raise awareness of and advocate for better understanding of why pregnancies end like this, and what can be done to prevent it. We want Iowa to be the safest place in the world for babies.”

<http://iowaindependent.com/16673/iowa-sisterhood-helps-new-moms-get-and-count-their-kicks>